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THE OCTAGON, 1741 NEW YORK AVENUE, WASHINGTON, D. C.

## THE OCTAGON

NUMBER 1741 NEW YORK AVENUE, WASHINGTON, D. C.

THE OCTAGON, number 1741 New York Avenue, Washington, D. C., is not only the permanent offices of the American Institute of Architects, to whom it belongs, but, through the generosity and courtesy of this organization, the main or home offices of the American Federation of Arts, the Archaeological Institute of America, the American Academy in Rome and other kindred organizations.

It stands on the corner of Eighteenth Street and New York Avenue, just one block from the Corcoran Gallery and the Department of State and less than five minutes' walk from the White House. Almost contemporaneous with the Executive Mansion it represents the finest type of early American private residence, and, indeed, served at one time as the home of the President, being placed by its owner at the disposal of

President and Mrs. Madison in 1814, after the Executive Mansion was burned by the British. Thus it chanced that it was in this house that the treaty of peace made at Ghent and held inviolate now for a hundred years was signed.

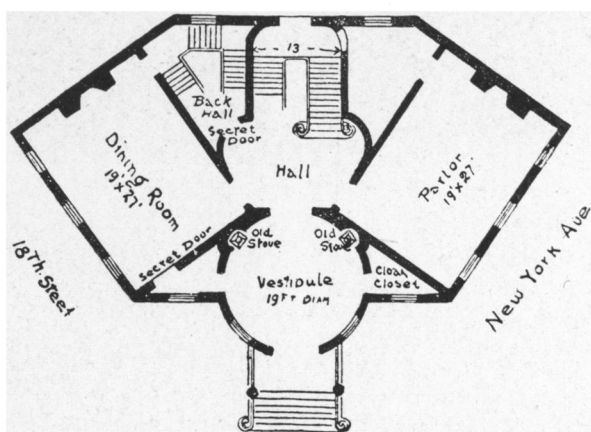
The architect was Dr. William Thornton, a man of distinction and note, the architect of the United States Capitol and the adviser of many of the early builders of the Republic. It is said, upon excellent authority, that Washington repeatedly sought his advice, that at Jefferson's request he made plans for the University of Virginia, and that for James Madison he planned "Montpelier." One other example of his work is still standing in Washington, "Tudor Place," on Georgetown heights, one of the purest and finest examples of American-Georgian architecture to be found. Thornton was also a competitor for the White

House, and the plan he drew now hangs on the wall of the circular tower room, once the library, in The Octagon, where the treaty of Ghent was signed and where the office of the Secretary of the American Institute of Architects has for some years been located.

Thornton was born on the Island of Tortola, one of the West Indies, May 27, 1761, studied and traveled extensively in Europe and later came to this country, where, in 1790, he married Miss Brodeau of Philadelphia. In 1793 he moved to Washington, which remained his home until his death in 1828. In September,

instead he built here at the National Capital, which was then in all truth merely the promise of a city laid out in a wilderness. Thus history relates that many times during the course of its erection Washington visited the house and gave thought to its development.

Colonel Tayloe for those days was a man of exceptional wealth. When he built The Octagon his income is set down as having been no less than \$75,000 a year. His connections were, furthermore, among the leading people of his day, the Tayloes being connected by marriage with the Lees, the Carters and



PLAN OF THE FIRST FLOOR OF THE OCTAGON

1794, he was made one of three Commissioners of the District of Columbia, and he had charge of executing the plan of the city drawn by L'Enfant. His position was abolished soon after the Government took possession of Washington in 1802. That same year he was made Superintendent of Patents, which position he held until his death, during which time he organized this important branch of the Government.

The Octagon was built as a residence for Col. John Tayloe between the years 1798 and 1800, the latter being the date of its completion. It is said that the Colonel's original intention was to build in Philadelphia, and that it was due to Washington's persuasions that

the Pages of Virginia, the Platers and Ogles of Maryland. His mother and his wife were both daughters of Governors of the latter State. So it was that when the house was completed it was constantly the scene of notable gatherings, and that across its threshold have trod many of those recognized leaders, not only in society but statesmanship, who gave distinction to the early history of this country. Indeed, the house was obviously planned for entertaining, but it was also planned as the home of a gentleman—in excellent taste but unostentatious, in a measure stately, yet at the same time homelike and essentially livable.

The lot upon which The Octagon stands is triangular in shape and is



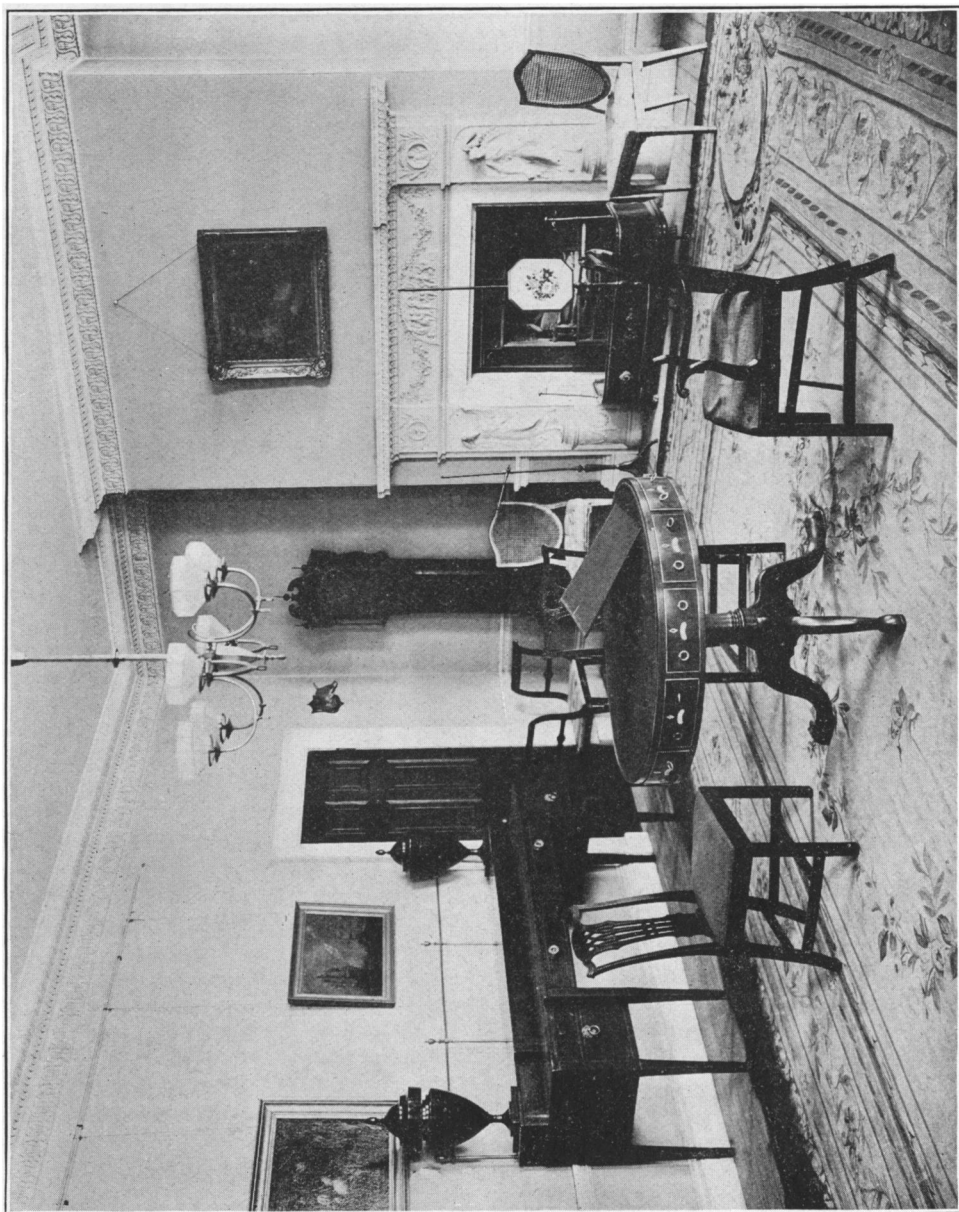
THE OCTAGON GARDEN

fenced in by a high brick wall, such as one still finds in parts of London surrounding private residences. The house itself is fan-shaped rather than as its name would imply octagonal. The material is brick, laid in Flemish bond, with Aquia Creek sandstone for trimming. The kitchen, stable, smokehouse and servants' quarters, were all detached from the house, as was the custom in those days, and were separated from the residence by the width of the charming old garden with its box-bordered paths. Of these the smokehouse and a portion of the stables are still standing. There was also a spacious tunnel leading from the rear of the house probably to the canal or river not very far distant, up which foreign ships brought their cargoes as well as boats from adjacent localities laden with market truck. A section of this tunnel still remains intact.

The interior of The Octagon is even more interesting than the exterior, beautiful in all its proportions and elaborately finished. The spacing of the openings in the walls is peculiarly felicitous and pleasing and the moldings used are of delightful design. On the first floor the

doors are of mahogany, and the hand-rail of the banister to the handsome curving staircase is the same. All the work in the circular vestibule, or front hall, coincides with the circumference of the so-called tower, the doors, sash and glass being made on the circle. In this vestibule now stand two old cast-iron stoves in the very niches which were originally prepared for them; on the floor is the original marble paving, gray and white square blocks set in a conventional pattern; on the door are the original hinges and lock, massive and well designed for their purposes. The key to such a mansion in those days was not to be conveniently carried in the owner's pocket. Off of this vestibule open two triangular closets each provided with a window, and undoubtedly purposed as cloak rooms for guests.

Opposite the front door is the back door leading out under the staircase to the old-fashioned garden, and above which is a fine arched window dignifying the landing of the stairs. In summer this door stands open and gladdens the eye of the visitor by a glimpse of greenery, with sunshine and shadow playing



PARLOR. THE OCTAGON

FURNITURE LENT AT ONE TIME BY THE LATE F. D. MILLET

across an old box-bordered path. In one of the corners of the garden still stands an old fig tree, possibly planted by the one-time owner and master, and over its high brick wall now run rampant climbing roses, all blossom and fragrance in the month of May.

Originally the room to the right of the entrance was the parlor and that to the left the dining-room. In both of these finely proportioned rooms there are handsome high mantels, made of fine cement composition, painted white. The one in the parlor is signed "Coade, London, 1799," and still shows some trace of gold leaf in some of the relieved portions. Obviously it was modeled by a capable artist. The mantels in the bed-rooms on the upper floors are of wood ornamented by work in putty stucco.

Leading into the back hall and also into the dining-room at the rear are secret doors ingeniously cut in the walls and crossed without apparent interruption by wash-boards, chair-boards, etc., showing neither knobs nor keyholes. The knobs and shutter buttons throughout the house are of brass and evidently of special pattern.

The upper floors conform in plan to the first floor, with closets set in to fill out irregular spaces. The Archeological Institute of America has its offices on the third floor; the second floor is given over to the offices of the American Institute of Architects; the parlor is now the

Board Room of the latter Institute; the dining-room, the office of the American Federation of Arts and the American Academy in Rome. Instead of merry balls and stately receptions the walls of this fine old residence now resound to the cheery thumping of the typewriter; expressmen, telegraph messengers, printers' assistants come and go. Occasionally a distinguished visitor drifts in, and once in a while a semi-official reception is held, when again there are refreshments and flowers. But whether the old house is a business building or not it will always remain in spirit a home, affording genial welcome as well as hospitality, exerting a spirit of peaceful tranquillity, creating an atmosphere in keeping with art and beneficial to the large and far-reaching work which three national organizations are now carrying on beneath its roof.

That the American Institute of Architects should have purchased this property when it was falling into ruin, and restored and preserved it for all time, is indeed a matter for thankfulness. That it has also given shelter therein to two sister institutions for some years past is also a matter to be acknowledged with warm gratitude. But for the ghosts, which prevented the occupation of The Octagon for many years, and the American Institute of Architects, this house, like many others of the period, would have long since been either torn down or restored beyond rescue or recognition.

## SOCIETY OF WESTERN ARTISTS

### ANNUAL EXHIBITION

THE Nineteenth Annual Exhibition of the Society of Western Artists, which opened at the City Art Museum of St. Louis on December 6th, was much stronger in technical qualities than the exhibition of last year. It was so in spite of the absence of work from all but a few members of its largest chapter and that many strong members of other

chapters sent no work. Otherwise it could not be said to have grown much; there were not many works that could be considered strikingly important, but there were some clever indications of a possibly new way of looking at not very important or picturesque things. In recalling the earlier work of the Society it was certainly stronger; but too large